

US-Russian proxy war in Syria intensifies

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A coalition of Russian, Iranian, and Syrian government military forces recaptured strategic areas of central Syria from US-backed Islamist militias during a joint offensive this weekend.

Russian war planes launched some 70 strikes in support of assaults by Syrian government troops and Iranian militias against rebel-held towns in the highland region of Tal Skik. The recaptured areas were occupied earlier this year by Islamist militant groups, including Al Nusra Front and other Al Qaeda-linked rebels, that are in direct alliance with Washington and its allies. The clashes between US and Russian-backed forces have underscored the immense danger of yet another major escalation of the Syrian war. Less than five years since it began, the US-fomented civil war in Syria has placed American and Russian forces squarely on opposite sides of an explosive proxy war.

Moscow's turn to direct intervention in the war has been followed by a sharp escalation of anti-Russian propaganda and announcements of stepped-up US intervention in Syria.

In a statement released Friday, the Pentagon confirmed its preparations to extend new forms of military aid to Kurdish nationalist militias as well as Sunni Islamist fighters. The US military will transfer "equipment packages and weapons" into the hands of "a select group of vetted leaders and their units," an official Defense Department release said on Friday.

Obama initially confirmed on Friday that the White House will support new rounds of military assistance to militant groups fighting in northern Syria. In an interview with the CBS News program 60 Minutes on Sunday, Obama further acknowledged that the White House is abandoning restrictions that confined US military assistance, at least officially, to "moderate" militias.

"My goal has been to try to test the proposition, can we be able to train and equip a moderate opposition

that's willing to fight ISIL? And what we've learned is that as long as Assad remains in power, it is very difficult to get those folks to focus their attention on ISIL," Obama said.

Despite its open commitment to another round of escalation in Syria, the Obama administration has continued on the receiving end of vociferous denunciations from ultra-right sections of the US ruling class. A flurry of recent reports and commentaries have made clear that powerful factions in Washington want nothing less than all-out US military intervention aimed at the removal of Assad by any means necessary.

In an editorial published on Sunday, "Don't Greenlight Mr Putin's Syria project," the *Washington Post* called for the creation of a US-Turkish militarized "safe haven" on the ground in northern Syria, under cover of a no fly-zone, combined with new initiatives to mobilize proxy militias against Assad.

"The United States need not go to war with Russia in order to take steps that counter Mr. Putin and preserve vital U.S. interests. Assistance to moderate forces fighting the Assad government should be accelerated: The rebels desperately need more U.S. antitank missiles. A safe zone should be established in northern Syria, in cooperation with Turkey, where civilians can be protected. Instead of lectures, Mr. Putin ought to be given red lines; without them, his aggression will escalate," the *Post* wrote.

A report published by the Brookings Institution on Friday, "Russia's Syrian entanglement: Can the West sit back and watch?" demanded more direct US intervention in northern Syria.

"Turkey is deeply upset with Russian direct support to the Assad regime, outraged by the violations of its airspace, and threatened by the air war so close to its borders. Statements of support from NATO headquarters are not enough; at the very minimum, the decision to withdraw the batteries of Patriot surface-to-

air missiles must be cancelled,” the report’s author, Paul K. Baev, wrote.

He argues that the US and NATO should carry out anti-Russian military preparations in Turkey similar to those implemented by the alliance in Eastern Europe and the Baltics in the wake of the 2014 US-backed coup in Kiev.

“When Estonia and Latvia came under Russian pressure last year, NATO gathered the resources and political will to bolster their security—and Russian air provocations on the Baltic theater have practically ceased. Turkey has every right to expect nothing less,” Baev concluded.

In testimony to the US Senate Armed Services Committee last week, focusing on the topic “Russian Strategy and Military Operations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies Vice President Heather Conley issued sweeping denunciations of Russia, arguing that Moscow is “back as a geopolitically destabilizing state actor,” hell bent on “reconstructing a 21st Century version of the Iron Curtain.”

“The Kremlin rejects the international rules of the post-World War II order, rules regarding territorial integrity and transparency that Putin’s Soviet predecessors accepted. The question is will the U.S. and its allies accept Putin’s new rules and new curtain so President Putin can achieve his grand bargain, or is the West willing to challenge and fully reject this construct, like it did during the Cold War era,” Conley asked.

For their part, Putin and his government are acting in the interests of the corrupt Russian capitalist oligarchy that emerged out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Russia’s entrance into the Syrian war flows from the imperatives of the struggle between rival nation states. Moscow’s policies are a response to the foreign policy of the US ruling elite, which has been actively working to limit Russia’s sphere of influence and ultimately reduce the country itself to a patchwork of neocolonial statelets.

According to a recent report, “The Background to Putin’s Actions in Syria,” by Anthony Cordesman, a leading analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russian involvement in Syria is part of a strategy developed by the Putin government in response to the US-organized “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Among the more

prominent were the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Ukrainian coup in 2014, as well as the ongoing Syrian conflict.

US-fomented “revolutions” are understood within Russian ruling circles as “posing a potential threat to Russia in the near term, to China and Asian states not aligned with the United States, and as a means of destabilizing states in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia,” according to Cordesman.

“Key Russian officers and officials presented a view of the United States and the West as deliberately destabilizing nations in North Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of the world for their own ends...They see the West as rejecting partnership and as threatening Russia along all of its borders with Europe,” Cordesman writes.

“Russian military officers tied the term color revolution to the crisis in Ukraine and to what they saw as a new US and European approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states,” he concludes.

In a further indication of the global dangers posed by the Syrian war, recent reports suggest that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army may be preparing to deploy war ships, naval-based air forces, and small groups of ground contingents and military advisors in support of Russian-led military operations in Syria. Dozens of Chinese military advisors are set to deploy from Chinese naval vessels approaching the Syrian coast, according to a Syrian army official cited by Lebanon-based Al-Masdar Al-’Arabi.

Chinese naval war ships, including an aircraft carrier named Liaoning, have already been patrolling areas of the Mediterranean, according to recent reports. China is seeking to expand its naval presence in major commercial sea lines and is participating in “anti-piracy” operations organized by the European Union as part of a militarized response to the influx of refugees from Libya and Syria.



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